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Why all the mystery about NRC spy role?

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OTTAWA — In the middle of Ottawa there is a five-storey building surrounded by a chain fence and topped by three strands of barbed wire. It's flood lit at night.

The building houses the "communications branch" of the National Research Council (NRC). It became clear last week, following a CBC TV documentary put together by one William B. MacAdam, and titled "The Fifth Estate," that our senior politicians either do not know much about this building and its operations or they do want to know about it.

Who works in the Communications Branch, NRC? How many bodies are there? What does the operation cost? Should we know more about it? Are there issues for public discussion in the confusing arguments which bubble up in the House of Commons after the documentary? Will the ripples flatten out and the matter disappear?

Very expensive

Intelligence and counter-intelligence activities since World War II (when the Communications Branch, NRC, got underway) have become very expensive and sophisticated. Indeed, only the U.S.S.R. And the U.S. can afford them. The Americans spend roughly \$7½ billion a year in the field, just about half our government's annual revenue. The Communications Branch, NRC, employs 300 odd people. Its operational cost probably runs between \$10 and \$15 million a year. What we spend for other intelligence services in the RCMP, External Affairs, and the Department of National Defence (DND) the other organizations with security and intelligence operations probably runs to another \$50 million. The whole Canadian total is a pittance compared to American spending.

The Communications Branch may be a cheap way to get an enormous "intelligence". We monitor and record a small slice of radio traffic, mostly in the Arctic or that sent by foreign embassies in Ottawa. We feed this to the Americans. They put the stuff through the costly and sophisticated machinery of code-breaking and assessing, developed particularly by the National Aeronautic and Space Agency (NASA). We get back a mass of material. So do the British.

At least we can assume this is so because the Communications Branch, NRC, has a liaison officer in Washington (Stewart Woolner) and in London (Carl Freeland). The Americans have their own people in Ottawa who work with the Communications Branch.

The RCMP and external affairs are privy to the material, the former through its security and intelligence division, the latter through its Arctic section.

In the House of Commons there seemed to be a remarkable lack of knowledge about the Communications Branch on the part of both the prime minister and a former prime minister, John Diefenbaker.

Mr. Diefenbaker, not Mr. Stanfield raised the issue. In itself, this was odd. The allegations that the NRC, our prime and proud federal scientific agency, was in the espionage business seems more important than the topic Mr. Stanfield chose that day for his questions (the sales tax on kids' clothing).

Did Diefenbaker know?

Mr. Diefenbaker insisted that nothing like this had been done in his days as prime minister. Is it possible he never knew about the Communications Branch? The big building which housed it was built and put into operations during his government.

One of my sources believes that Mr. Diefenbaker not only knew about secret work being done within the NRC, he tried to abolish it. Certainly, he introduced a new policy which is still in force: the leader of the official opposition is periodically briefed by the PM of matters of national security. This may explain Mr. Stanfield's silence, though not Mr. Diefenbaker's agitation.

The traffic which the Communications Branch records and transmits to Washington is not intelligible to the ordinary ear. Computers must decipher it. We can't afford them. The usefulness to Canada of the operation has, I understand, been questioned by Mr. Trudeau. He has asked the agency to justify its existence.

One reason may be that it badly needs more modern (and expensive) equipment.

At one time, the NRC was a marvellous

fin". Everyone understands that there are mysteries and secrets in scientific research. Now that the cat is openly out of the bag, will continuance of the branch within NRC harm the council's reputation in international scientific circles? Why doesn't the RCMP or DND take it over?

In intelligence work, as in other fields increasingly dominated by high technology, only the super-powers can afford the costs. We found this out with the Avro Arrow and in the development of tanks and weaponry.

In this operation we provide our powerful neighbor with a small body of useful information. In return we are almost certainly getting more information that we need or want. Is sharing, even peripherally, vital to our security?

Almost all our politicians in power prefer not to know much about security and intelligence. But highly-placed people noting Watergate's excesses, get concerned. Could the Communications Branch, NRC, get out of hand? It was started for specific reasons; it has become a routine; its expenditures and work are never openly questioned or examined. And all the while its purposes and the complexities of the field have changed.

The foreign embassy staffs in Ottawa, especially those of eastern block countries, are well aware of the Communications Branch operations. They joke about it. Yet few of us know much about it and can't find out from Canadian sources.

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